
They say they “Don’t Know”

What can we learn about uncertainty and the college transition from students’ survey responses?

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Purposes

- to explore potential meanings of DK responses related to certainty about college
- to understand how common predictors of the college transition may predict DK responses and uncertainty about the college transition
- to understand the college enrollment outcomes of DK respondents who may be uncertain about college enrollment and/or attainment

Literature – How do researchers handle DK responses?

- Make DK responses missing data (e.g., Garrison, 1982; Kelpé Kern, 2000; Lowman & Elliot, 2008; Morgan, 1996)
- Retain the DK data, coding it as the lowest expectation (e.g., Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001; Flowers, Milner & Moore, 2003)
- Retain the data as its own category (e.g., Ishitani, 2006 labeled these as “unsure”)
- Many studies are not explicit about this

Data & Methods

- ELS 2002-2006
- Comparison of DK Responses for differing questions
 - Crosstabs
- Predictors of DK Responses
 - Binary and multinomial logistic regression – responded DK vs. college-positive and college-negative responses
- Enrollment outcomes for DK respondents
 - Binary logistic regression – enrolled vs. not enrolled, with DK response as a predictor

Results

- About 7% of students responded DK for expectations
- About 5% of students responded DK for plans
- Less than 20% of students who responded DK about the level of education expected also answered DK in response to plans for future schooling.

Results

	Do not plan for future schooling	Plan for future schooling	Don't know about plans for future schooling
Do not expect any college	140	200	140
Expect some college	60	11,080	220
DK about educational expectations	20	700	170

Selected Results – Predictors of DK Responses

- Latinos = slightly higher odds (than Whites) of DK about attainment expectations, but no difference regarding enrollment plans
- Blacks = no difference in DK related to attainment expectations, but lower odds (than Whites) of DK for college plans
- No gender difference in DK for attainment expectations, but lower female odds of DK for enrollment plans

Results – Enrollment outcomes

- Positive expectations/plans predict higher odds of enrollment compared to the DK response, and the negative expectation predicts much lower odds of enrollment compared to the DK response
- The uncertain cohort of respondents appear to differ in their enrollment outcomes, even controlling for many salient factors, compared to either the college-positive cohort or the college-negative cohort.

Implications for survey design and quantitative research

- Attainment expectations and enrollment plans are different, and should be treated as such
- Uncertainty is not a dichotomous construct by nature, although researchers often represent it that way, and more innovative methods should be considered
- How should researchers handle DK respondents in statistical analysis?

Implications for the college transition

- Past research may actually under-represent the number of students who expect to attend college, based on misuse of DK responses
- Gender or racial gaps may be misrepresented depending on the handling of DK responses
- For policy and practice, the DK or uncertain students should also be treated as unique, and not assumed to be college-negative

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- For a copy of the paper, please contact

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